

U.S. Reports New Iranian Missiles; Threat to Hormuz Oil Traffic Seen

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WASHINGTON, March 14 — Iran has increased its threat to the flow of oil out of the Persian Gulf by installing large land-based anti-ship missiles near the Strait of Hormuz, according to American intelligence sources.

The missile system, which appears to be of a Chinese design known as HY-2, was spotted by American intelligence within the last month. The HY-2 system is based on a Chinese-built version of the Russian-designed missile known in the West as SS-N-2 or "Styx."

The missiles are reportedly at two locations along the strait. Styx missiles carry warheads of about 1,000 pounds of high explosive and have a range of 25 to 50 miles, depending upon the model. This is sufficient to reach the shipping lanes in and out of the Persian Gulf at the strait, which is 50 miles wide at its narrowest point.

Possible Escalation Seen

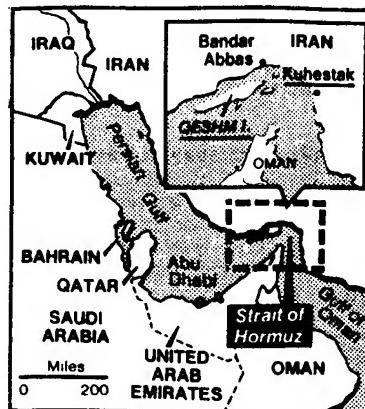
"This could represent an escalation in the Gulf conflict," Norman Polmar, a naval author and analyst, said. "These missiles are potentially capable of sinking an oil supertanker and blocking the channel."

The probability that Iran would actually cut off the strait is limited by its own need to ship oil through the passage, analysts say. But they believe Iran may nevertheless be trying to warn its adversaries that it has the means to take such a drastic action.

None of the missiles have been fired, but their presence is seen as a signal by Iran that it is prepared to continue and perhaps intensify the shipping war in the gulf against Iraq. Since the first of the year, the Iranians have stepped up attacks on shipping in the gulf.

Most of the attacks have been against ships going in and out of Kuwait, which is situated at the head of the Persian Gulf. Kuwait backs its neighbor Iraq in its war with Iran and is a major transshipment point for war matériel destined for Iraq.

Until the beginning of this year, most Iranian attacks against ships took place in daytime and consisted of bombing or rocket attacks by the Iranian Air Force. Early in the year, however, the Iranians began to attack ships at night, with warships firing Italian-made "Sea Killer" missiles. While these missiles can damage a ship and cause fires, they normally cannot sink a huge supertanker, short of a lucky hit. The Sea Killer carries 154 pounds of high explosive, only about 15 percent of the amount the Styx carries.



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Missiles are at Strait of Hormuz.

The HY-2 missile system is a Chinese coastal defense version of a Soviet ship-borne system that fires the Styx. The Russians have exported the Styx to their allies and third world nations. According to the authoritative Jane's Weapon Systems year book, the version manufactured by the Chinese was also made available for export in 1984.

Chinese Arms Sales an Issue

It is not known whether the weapons system was provided to Iran by Beijing directly, or through a third party.

The issue of Chinese arms sales to Iran came up earlier this month during the visit of Secretary of State George P. Shultz to China. Intelligence officials have cited China as a major weapons supplier to Teheran. Mr. Shultz said that when he urged the Chinese leaders not to sell arms to Iran, they "restated their position — they have said that they don't sell arms to Iran."

The HY-2 system consists of a radar direction system and launchers that carry the Styx missiles, which are more than 20 feet long and fly just above the surface of the water at subsonic speeds.

According to intelligence sources, there are about a half dozen missiles at two separate locations near the mouth of the gulf. One is on the Iranian coastline near the town of Kuhestak, the other on the island of Qeshm near Bandar Abbas, a major port.

Demonstrating an Ability

While intelligence officials acknowledge that the missiles may have been installed by the Iranians to protect Bandar Abbas from attack, they say it is more likely that they are intended to demonstrate Teheran's ability to interrupt Gulf shipping.

Mr. Polmar said that the missiles pose little threat to United States warships and those of other navies that operate in and around the entrance to the Persian Gulf.

"Modern warships have electronics and weapons to deal with Styx-type weapons," Mr. Polmar said. "It is com-

mercial shipping that is in danger, unless a friendly warship is on duty round the clock to protect ships from any missiles fired."

The Administration has said on several occasions that it would not tolerate interference with free transit of the strait.

The United States maintains a small flotilla of about six frigates and destroyers in the Persian Gulf region at all times, although the Navy does not routinely provide information on their location and plans. French, British and Soviet warships sail the gulf waters on occasion. Oman, on the southern side of the Strait of Hormuz, also has patrol boats in the area, and they are said to be capable of countering the Iranian missiles.

Old Technology Updated

Naval experts say the Styx missile was originally developed by the Soviet Union in the 1950's. It is believed that the Chinese obtained the missile in the early 1960's and modified it for coastal defense soon after. Although the Styx represents old technology, weapons experts say the Russians have made many improvements to the basic weapon. Some early improvements were shared with the Chinese, and the Chinese have added some of their own modifications.

"The Soviets never throw anything away," one military official said. "They just upgrade weapons and provide them to client states." In addition to radar guidance, some of the later models are said to have radio controls or infrared heat-seeking guidance systems. It was not disclosed what form of guidance the Iranian system employs.

In its shipboard version, the Styx missile received considerable publicity during the Arab-Israeli war of 1967, when an Egyptian patrol boat armed with the weapon sank the Israeli destroyer Eilat off the northern coast of the Sinai Peninsula. Forty seven Israeli seamen were killed and 91 wounded in the attack.

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The Styx Missile AT A GLANCE

History

The Styx missiles, which American intelligence sources say have been installed by Iran on its side of the Strait of Hormuz, were purchased from China. The missile was designed in the Soviet Union and first put into service in 1959 or 1960. Chinese-built missiles of this design were first offered for sale in 1964.

Dimensions

Each missile is 20.5 feet long

and 2.5 feet in diameter.

Performance

The Styx is a short- to medium-range missile widely used by the Soviet Navy since 1960 as a surface-to-surface weapon in anti-ship or shore bombardment attacks. The missile has a range of 50 miles and reportedly carries a warhead containing 1,000 pounds of explosives.

Source: Jane's Weapon Systems

